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**Guard troops
test field skills
at Mill Creek**

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Local Guard troops hone tactical edge on Mill Creek lands

Story and photos by Gina Baltrusch

Outdoor recreation enthusiasts at Mill Creek April 18 may have been surprised by an unusual group of visitors – but only if they were sharp-eyed enough to see them.

About 30 initial-entry-training troops assigned to the Washington National Guard Pasco-Walla Walla new recruit training program roamed the terrain around Bennington Lake with maps and compasses to sharpen their land navigation skills. Other Mill Creek visitors may not have noticed the camouflage-clad Soldiers creeping through the woods and low-crawling across grassy areas.

Working in teams of four or five, the troops tried to find five points on the ground in the shortest possible time, all the while hiding from snipers eager to “shoot” them and set off the laser-activated alarms on their harnesses if they failed to tactically move between map points.

Many new Guard Soldiers enlist as juniors in high school, attend Basic Combat Training during the summer before their senior year, then attend job-specific Army training once they finish high school. Until graduation, they become part of the new recruit program, training with other Guardsmen on drill weekends.

“We’re really glad to have federal lands nearby to help us train,” said Sgt. 1st Class Mark Mebes, Guard recruiter in Walla Walla and a primary instructor for the new recruit program. “We’d be limited to training in a parking lot if it weren’t for Mill Creek. It’s just not cost or time effective to take everyone to the Yakima Training Center for just a weekend, and YTC doesn’t offer the terrain and vegetation features that Mill Creek has.”

Mebes touts Mill Creek as perfect for the unit’s tactical land navigation test – a challenging field environment to evaluate Soldiers on map reading, land navigation, first aid and casualty evacuation skills.

“It’s got a good mix of terrain – hills, valleys, open areas, woods and water obstacles,” he explained. “We’ve taught ‘land-nav’ here for years. It’s great that another element of the Army family – the Army Corps of Engineers – helps us make training more realistic for our Soldiers.”

The Guard coordinated with project officials for a special event permit, working out the land-use details to ensure troop training would not interfere with the project’s obligations to the general public.

“Most visitors don’t even know they’re out there. The Guard put up signs to let visitors know there were Soldiers out there training. The troops weren’t carrying weapons and the snipers kept their gun-shaped laser system activation devices concealed when they weren’t using them, so if a civilian did see them, they wouldn’t be too concerned,” said Dave Hays, Mill Creek project manager.

Letting the Guard train at Mill Creek serves as a chance for the District to help the Army’s war-fighter training mission, he added.

“Part of our mission is to support the military side of the house. If we can do that on our recreation lands and continue to serve the general public, that’s something we want to do,” said Hays. “They always take care to not damage the lands. We’d welcome them back to train here again.”



Pvt. Branden Gradin (left) and Pvt. Shawn Hernandez roamed the terrain around Bennington Lake area, identifying nearby terrain features to determine training points.



Pfc. Nicholas Busse-Paul uses the compass-to-chart method to determine a magnetic azimuth for an objective on the ground.



refer to a map of the Bennington
to determine their team's location.



seek method to determine the



Pfc. Patrick Taylor (right) and Pvt. Branden Gradin (left) radio to report a teammate's simulated injuries as they conceal themselves on a deer trail through the brush.



Above, Pvt. Francisco Gomez tests his military common tasks knowledge during a written test given at one of the point stations. Left, Pfc. Patrick Taylor sprints toward nearby trees that will lend some tactical cover from snipers – ROTC cadets from Washington State University and Eastern Washington University.



Pvt. Branden Gradin (left), Pvt. Shawn Hernandez and Pvt. Brittney Stanton (right) travel in three-to-five-second rushes between trees as they try to advance unobserved along a ridge above Bennington Lake.